Adult Education, Gender and Social Change

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1. Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed major changes in the position of women in Danish society. In 1960 27 pct. of all married Danish women participated in the labour market; in 1990 the figure had risen to 90 pct., which means that there is little difference between the labour market participation of men, single women and married women. Women also became more integrated in public and political life. While party membership declined in general, the rate of party membership between men and women was levelled. The share of female members of parliament rose from 11 pct. in 1966 to 33 pct. in 1991 (Cf. Togeby 1994).

During the same period, Danish women became less tied to their traditional role in the family. Public policy facilitated women's employment by expanding the public child-care provision. By 1990, more than two thirds of all children up to the age of five were placed in public day-care institutions or schemes. The gender division of labour in the family also underwent considerable changes, with men doing a greater (although by no means an equal) share of domestic work.

This does not mean that gender inequality has disappeared from Danish society. Although most women participate in the labour market, they generally have lower wages and higher unemployment rates. And in political life, many aspects of power are still dominated by men. Still one cannot escape the conclusion that some of the most glaring gender inequalities in social life have been markedly reduced.

This is also the case in education. What has often been called an "educational explosion" has been a prominent feature of social and cultural change since the early sixties. There has been a dramatic increase in most types of education. Since the seventies the expansion has encompassed not only "ordinary", schooling and education, but also adult education, often on a part-time basis. It should be noted, however, that the "explosion" has been fuelled mainly by the educational aspirations and participation of women. Compared to this, the pattern of education in the male population has remained relatively

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constant.

In this paper I shall discuss the role of education in the development of gender relations in Danish society. I assume that education reflects and supports the relations of gender institutionalized in society, but also that educational developments may contribute to changing these relations. I focus on two crucial sites where education operates in social life, the labour market and political participation.

2. Educational institutionalization and gender

The role of education in society may be conceptualized in different ways. One theoretical approach, which I find fruitful in this context, is the so-called institutional analysis of education. This approach has been pioneered by sociologists working at Stanford University in the USA, but has had little influence on Danish educational research. In institutional analysis, education is seen primarily as a mechanism for incorporating people in a western model of citizenship, based on a combination of state organization and individualism. Ramirez & Boli (1987) point to the fact that the nation-states of the modern world system have increasingly emphasized education as a civil right, but also as an obligation. They document this through quantitative content analyses of national constitutions and educational declarations. It may seem surprising that this development occurs in many different nations, but the proponents of institutional analysis assume that the nation-states were influenced by a common set of factors, and followed generally similar doctrines. Nation-states were only to some extent independent units; they functioned within a common cultural framework.

The development of modern nation-states contains an inherent tension between two tendencies: A growing recognition and empowerment of individuals on one hand, and an institutionalization and enforcement of national frameworks for social life at many levels. This tension between state organization and individualism was mediated in the idea of citizenship. The state granted the citizen a certain quality of life, while citizens recognized the competence and initiative of the state. In this conception citizenship includes not only civil and political, but also social rights. But this reciprocity between state and citizens works better if all members of society are good citizens. They should consequently be socialized.

In institutional analysis, the development of educational institutions and practises is not seen primarily as a result of

the crystallization of social demands for skilled manpower. The steadily increasing involvement of populations in formal education is rather seen as a part of and a result of the building of nation-states.

Ramirez & Cha (1990) have discussed the evolution of the relations between gender and education from the viewpoint of institutional analysis. They argue that in the second half of the 19th century, education, citizenship and social development became closely interwoven themes in a political discourse, which connected mass schooling to political progress. The aim of educational policy-makers was to create culturally homogeneous, loyal and productive mass citizens. This development undermined the gender-based construction of collective identities, by installing in both boys and girls common elements of citizenship and personal individuality.

To illustrate the long-term trend in gender relations in western educational systems Ramirez & Cha select three indicators:

1. The extent to which the curricular timetables in primary and secondary schools are differentiated along gender lines.
2. The share of women participating in higher secondary education.
3. The extent of coeducation (i.e. boys and girls being taught together) in primary and secondary schooling.

Since the turn of the century, all three indicators point towards a major reduction of gender differences. There are variations, of course. For instance, the spread of coeducation occurs earlier in the United States and in Scandinavia than in Belgium and France. But the common trend is clear: Educational discrimination between sexes is decreasing.

When educational policy-makers around the turn of the century argued for the improvement of girls' primary schooling, they generally did not envisage that women should enter the same labour markets as men. They proposed that schooling would shape girls to be better mothers and upholders of family solidarity. Thus, in Ramirez & Cha's view the association of women with the labour market was not at major aim of mass schooling, but a major side effect.

There are clear limits to institutional analysis. In most cases, the empirical analyses deal with long-term historical trends in the movement of macro-indicators, and the explanations offered are of a rather general nature. Considering that this approach calls itself "institutional", it shows surprisingly

little interest in the processes within educational institutions.

Still, institutional analysis does seem to offer a plausible account of the origins and establishment of public mass educational systems. What seems less plausible is that well-established educational systems should continue to be directed by the aims of nation-building. Once educational systems reach a certain degree of "maturity", two distinct tendencies develop: On one hand the educational system acquires an internal dynamic, which creates inner coherence and growth (cf. Archer 1982). And on the other hand education is coupled increasingly to the world of work, because this is a central area of human life and welfare. The connection to the labour market is often brought about "from below", because workers try to use education as an instrument to improve their positions in the world of work. However, institutional education also has effects on other life areas, not least on the public sphere and on political participation.

Later in this paper I shall discuss the impact of gendered educational patterns on the labour market and on political participation. But first I shall outline some main structures and developments in education.

3. Gender differences in the Danish educational system

The gender pattern in modern Danish education is complex. It ranges from a clear levelling of some inequalities, through a hesitant reduction of others, to the persistence or deepening of yet other differences. In my view, this pattern should be understood as emerging from the interaction of three distinct forces. The first force is the traditional gender division of labour, and its long-term shaping of the socialization of individuals. These traditional gender differences constitute a raw material, which institutional education works on, partly reproducing and party changing the patterns. The second force is the structures and processes of institutional education. For instance, an educational system with strong institutional boundaries between sectors and levels will tend to produce strong gender segregation, while a system with permeable boundaries and comprehensive institutions will tend to reduce gender segregation. The third force is the "demand" for educated people, mainly from work organizations, but also from other social organizations like the military. Work in these organizations often reflects a gender division of labour, but on the other hand the need to recruit able persons may lead to transcend established gender boundaries. The demand for educated persons reflects both these

tendencies.

The position of men and women in Danish education has changed considerably during the last two decades. The share of women is growing, and this goes especially for the groups completing a long-term higher education (most often at a university). In 1981 25 pct. of the people who had completed a long-term higher education were women; in 1994, the share had risen to 34 pct. (Danish National Bureau of Statistics et.al. 1995). This change may not look so dramatic, but one should remember that it concerns the educated segment of the total population, not the composition of current enrolments in education.

There is still a gender hierarchy in education. This is especially reflected in the fact that more women than men have completed only primary schooling and short-term labour market training. But the hierarchy is clearly undergoing a transformation, especially when we look at higher levels of education.

When the distribution of education is described solely in terms of levels of education, an important aspect of gender inequality is overlooked, i.e. the unequal distribution of "men's trades" and "women's trades" at different levels. This unequal distribution is evident at all levels in the Danish educational system. It is most pronounced within short-time higher education, with subjects like health-care, child-care and education dominated by women and economics and technology dominated by men. Although there are fewer "pure" men's and women's branches than earlier, it is still a minority of each sex who enter really gender-mixed branches (cf. Maerkedahl 1990, p 234). What may seem surprising is that gender-mixed branches are found most often at the top, among graduates from long-term higher education. Today the gender distribution among students of long-term higher education within the arts, health care, education and agriculture is relatively equal. And in the academic studies within the social sciences, the share of women has risen steeply during the eighties. In law and medicine, more than half of today's students are women.

How should we interpret this trend? In my opinion, it is fundamentally determined by the fact that during the latest decades, a steadily increasing number of women have enrolled in education beyond the primary level. A main reason for this is the widespread confidence that education provides an admission card to the labour market. The types of education chosen by women are partly determined by their areas of interest, and partly by the institutional structures and traditions of the educational

system. Within secondary vocational education, only one sizeable branch has in reality been open to women, and that is the branch of trade and office work. Other branches, which have the capacity to absorb a significant increase in enrolments, have all been distinctly male-dominated. Other opportunities are the female-dominated professions within the public sector, like nursing and child-care work. But the capacity of these branches is still relatively limited, and with a great number of applicants the conditions of entry have tended to become more demanding in terms of previous schooling. The combined result of these factors has been that many of the young women have chosen to enter the academic branch of secondary higher education. Today, approximately two thirds of the students in general upper secondary education (the "gymnasium") are girls. And a considerable number of these girls (especially those achieving good grades) enter long-term higher education.

In sum, there has been a considerable levelling of gender inequalities in Danish education, and especially in higher education. There are still distinct differences in men's and women's choice of subjects and trades, but here also the differences have been reduced, especially at higher levels of education.

4. The role of adult education

To some degree the different levels and sectors of education constitute a common system, tied together by institutional structures and processes. The educational system fulfils certain functions in other areas of social life, and its actors are involved in communication with many other types of actors and institutions. Still, the educational system is characterized by an administrative logic and by some deeply rooted traditions of its own, upheld, e.g. by the teachers as a social group.

Adult education and training is less institutionalized. Although the main types of adult education increasingly create their own domains, their traditions, teachers and processes of governance have not yet been tied together in an "adult education system". Also, the short-term or part-time nature of most adult education means that people in education typically keep strong commitments to other areas of life. Bearing this in mind, one would expect the traditional gender differences rooted in dominant social institutions like work organizations and families to be reproduced more clearly in adult education and training than in ordinary education.

Adult education in Denmark is split in three main sectors: Vocational training, general formal education, and popular education. Vocational education, of course, aims directly at improving the vocational skills and qualifications of adults, and these courses are often initiated by employers. The aim of general formal education is to improve the general competence of adults by preparing them for examinations equivalent to those passed by young people after primary or secondary school. This in turn should allow these people to improve their level of vocational education or competence. Popular education aims at providing adults with the opportunities of activity, skills, knowledge and personal development in their leisure time.

In this paper I focus on the role of education in two particular areas of social life, the labour market and political participation. It seems obvious to relate these areas to the sectors of adult education, and I shall in fact do this. But it should be emphasized that in the interests of adult students, and in the uses they make of their education, the demarcations of these sectors are not so clear. Jacobsen (1991) has investigated the motives for participating in different kinds of adult education, using survey methods. He distinguishes between two major categories: Persons attending courses because of work-related motives, and persons attending courses for other reasons. The people who attend because of work-related motives constitute 19 pct. in general formal adult education, 55 pct. in vocational education, and 71 pct. in job-related training (Jacobsen 1991, p 96). It seems striking that almost half the students in vocational adult education do not indicate work-related motives as their main reason for participating.

Nevertheless, the sector-specific aims, institutions and forms of funding do in fact leave their distinct mark on courses as well as on students. And this mark also implies a gender division of labour: Since the second world war adult vocational training has been clearly dominated by men, while popular education courses mainly have recruited women. Today this also applies to general formal education; in 1994, two thirds of all persons participating in this kind of adult education were women (cf National Bureau of Statistics et.al. 1995). But in general, the increasing educational aspirations of women have had a strong impact in all kinds of adult education. Whether the aim has been to secure links to the labour market, to learn more about contemporary society, or to establish an independent life outside family obligations, participation in adult education has often

been part in the mobilization of women as equal citizens.

5. Education, labour markets and job-related training

A crucial consequence of the spreading of institutional education is that documented educational qualifications become an increasingly important criterion in the selection for employment in the labour market. Earlier this mechanism operated mostly within individual trades and professions, but in modern societies it seems to be generalized to most parts of the labour market, supported by the increasing integration and coherence within the educational system. This process of generalization is still going on, and it is more advanced for men than for women.

This raises the question whether the changes in educational patterns, which I tried to outline above, have consequences for gender differences in the labour market.

If one looks at the horizontal gender division of labour, educational changes mainly take the form of higher shares of women in a number of branches. But this tendency of a levelling is partly counteracted in the transition from education to the labour market. It is a well-known fact that since the mid-seventies the level of unemployment has been markedly higher for women than for men. In 1993 unemployment in the Danish labour force was 9,3 pct. among men and 11,5 pct. among women (National Bureau of Statistics et.al. 1995).

As mentioned above, the levelling of gender inequalities has proceeded fastest within long-term higher education. Does this have any consequences for the situation on the labour market? Official statistics do in fact indicate that a higher level of education contributes to reducing the difference between men's and women's foothold in the labour market. Both the labour market participation rate and the employment rate rise with the level of education. And the higher the educational level, the smaller the gender difference. Among all people with only primary schooling, 67 pct. of the men and 56 pct. of the women were in employment in 1994; while among people with higher education, 92 pct. of the men and 88 pct. of the women were in employment (Bonke 1995, p. 55).

The effects of participation in adult education on the labour market situation are even more difficult to assess. Evaluation studies focusing on educational programs for unemployed adults have often tried to map employment effects, but the results have seldom been convincing, and they should not be generalized to the "ordinary" sectors of adult education. Instead, I shall focus on

gender differences in the access to and experience of job-related vocational training, on the basis of a fairly recent and comprehensive survey done by the National Institute of Social Research (Andersen & Anker 1991).

This survey was based on a representative sample; respondents were asked whether they had ever participated in job-related training, and how much and in which ways they had participated in job-related training during the latest year before the interview.

It turns out that roughly one third of the adult population had never participated in job-related training. However, 40 pct. had participated during the latest year. This indicates a great deal of overlap among people participating from year to year, which means that job-related training is accumulated with particular groups. Employees in higher and management positions participated most frequently (Andersen & Anker 1991, p 15-16). Gender does not in itself appear to have significant influence on the participation in job-related training during the latest year (Andersen & Anker 1991, p. 59). But there is a considerable gender difference among persons between the ages of 40 and 60. For men, the frequency of participation is highest when they age between 40 and 50, while for women it is highest between 30 and 40 (Andersen & anker 1991, p. 50). This is actually the same gender pattern one finds in the possession of secondary and higher educational qualifications among the mature parts of the Danish population.

It is interesting to note that a survey of adult education done in the seventies (also by the National Institute of Social Research) indicated that women participated a good deal less than men in job-related training. The authors of the report concluded that participation in adult education reflects the previous educational career of individuals: The higher their level of ordinary education (especially vocational education), the more they participate in vocational adult education. By the mid-seventies adult women's level of vocational education was markedly lower than men's, and this shaped their participation in job-related training (Bunnage & Hedegaard 1978, p. 145). Today women appear to participate to approximately the same extent as men, although older women still lag behind. It seems that the conclusion of Bunnage & Hedegaard is still valid, and that the reduction of gender differences in ordinary education and in adult education are connected.

The survey also tried to assess how participants benefited from job-related training. Some possible effects are investiga-

ted, among these "job-related benefits" and "person-related labour market effects". Gaining job-related benefits means that individuals are able to make use of acquired skills in their job. The data indicate that women less frequently than men have job-related benefits from participation in courses. And this still applies if the analysis is narrowed to persons currently in employment (Andersen & Anker 1991, p. 103).

Information on the participation in and effects of job-related training have also been provided by other surveys and analyses. Summing up, I would describe the situation as follows: In the adult population as a whole, women have participated somewhat less than men in job-related training. There is however no significant gender difference in the current level of participation, while there are some recognizable gender differences in the preference for different subject-areas. In general women gain fewer labour market benefits from participation in job-related training than men; this tendency may also be seen in ordinary vocational education. All in all, the recent survey does not confirm the assumption that gender differences would be greater within job-related training than within ordinary vocational education.

6. Education and citizenship

In politics as well as in the workplace, formal education has increasingly become a resource necessary for participation. It has often been demonstrated that there is a strong link between political participation and political commitment. Higher levels of education foster skills and knowledge, which supports political activity, but it also enhances motivation and interest. Ingelhart (1990) assigns the concept of "cognitive mobilisation" a major role in explaining the changes in political participation during the latest decades. As defined by Ingelhart, cognitive mobilisation is a long-term process, connected to the development of industrial societies. The process involves the "liberation" of people from traditional and local communities, and their integration in modern organizations and networks of communication, which increasingly bring them into contact with politics at a national level. Education should not be identified with cognitive mobilization, but Ingelhart sees it as the best indicator.

Cognitive mobilization interacts with other processes of change, not least the gradual levelling of gender-based inequalities in political roles. Women are still less integrated in

political life than men, but the differences have clearly been reduced (Ingelhart 1990, p. 341).

This raises the question of how cognitive mobilisation and gender interact. In his investigation of this Ingelhart focuses especially on participation in discussions of political matters in everyday life. In all of the 20 nations on which Ingelhart's analysis is based, women are less inclined to discuss politics than men. The gender difference varies from nation to nation, but there is a general tendency that the gender difference is pronounced among people with low educational levels, while it is minimal among people with a high level of education (Ingelhart 1990, p. 347).

It is my assumption that education creates individual resources, which strengthen the political interest and participation of individuals. Thus, when women's level of education is raised, and approaches that of men, it will lead to at reduction of the gender gap in political interest and participation. It is in fact likely that education plays a more important role in the political mobilization of women, because education opens ways to compensate for some of the more tradition-defined power positions of men. Education contributes to the establishment of women as individuals, whose political participation is not primarily defined by their spouses. But of course other factors also contribute to this development, not least the strengthening of women's foothold in the labour market.

This view of the political role of education is fundamentally in line with Ingelhart's concept of cognitive mobilisation. But it is a long-range tendency, which is modified by shifting contexts and situations.

Recent Danish research offers no clear vindication or refutation of Ingelhart' assumptions. The research of Togeby, who has analysed gender differences in political participation among relatively young people, clearly indicates that gender differences are smaller among the well-educated (Togeby 1994). But this is contradicted by results from a nationwide survey of citizenship in Denmark, which indicates that gender differences in political interest and participation among the well-educated young people have in fact been growing in recent years (Andersen et al 1993, Siim 1994).

I tend to agree with the basic assumption that the reduction of gender gaps in education contributes to reducing gender gaps in political participation. But this does not necessarily mean that men and women develop identical political interests and

engage in the same types of political activity. Several theorists have proposed that women still subscribe to a more responsible and "caring" rationality (cf. Leira 1992), and one would expect that this leaves its mark on women's political participation. Togeby proposes that this rationality is the reason why Danish women have turned more to left-wing political attitudes; women emphasize the caring aspects of welfare society, and they react more sharply on the neglect or repression of these aspects. Togeby also documents that feminist attitudes seem to have spread among Danish women, and sees this as a reaction to the fact that women have experienced considerable gender equality in educational institutions, this has not led to nearly the same degree of equality in the labour market (Togeby 1994a). If this is true, it is a situational effect, which should weaken during the life course.

Turning to adult education, the influence of this on citizenship has several aspects. At the societal level it concerns the way political organizations and institutions use adult education as a tool of political mobilization and integration, at the individual level it concerns the way political commitment and knowledge affect the motivation for and the effects of participation in adult education.

If we pose these questions in relation to Danish adult education in general, existing research does not provide many answers. The potential of adult education for strengthening political integration and improving political participation was a crucial argument in the institutionalization of Danish popular adult education in the nineteen forties (cf. Salling Olesen 1989). There is however little documentation of the actual effects of adult education in this area. Jacobsen (1991) is one of the few attempts to give a general assessment of the ideological function of adult education, but his definitions and argument on this topic are not very convincing, and he does trace or discuss gender differences in the motives of adult students.

I find it plausible that adult education plays a special role in the political mobilization of women. Like ordinary education, adult education creates resources for political participation, and this will tend to increase the political interests and activity of women, and perhaps also reduce or eliminate the gender gap. But engaging in education will also tend to strengthen the political articulation of care rationality and of feminist attitudes. Cognitive mobilization in adult education builds on experiences of adult life, from the labour market and

from public life. This kind of mobilization can be expected to have more lasting effects that the mobilization of young women in educational institutions. Because of this, I consider adult education an important influence on the political participation of women in present-day Danish society.

7. Conclusion

How much do gender-related changes in education affect the gender relations in other areas of social life? Some contributions to existing research tend to minimize the social effects of education, while other contributions are much more optimistic on the behalf of the educational institutions.

Many contributions to educational theory proceed from the premise that educational institutions fill needs predefined by other institutions of society, notably by work organizations and the labour market. Such analyses run the risk of overlooking educational developments which do not fit this scheme, and also the wider social impacts of such developments. On the other hand, analyses from other parts of the social sciences often ascribe education a dynamic role in social development. For instance many political scientists see rising levels of education as an important precondition for the increase and widening of political participation.

In the case of gender I think there is a good deal of truth in the dynamic view of the role of education, and this is supported by some of the analyses and findings I have mentioned in this article. I find it plausible that educational change has contributed substantially to reducing the inequality between men and women in Denmark, although education has worked together with other important forces. I would not, however, want to draw a general conclusion regarding the educational system's potential for creating social change. During the sixties and seventies at great deal of educational resources were invested in the reduction of class inequalities in Danish society, but apparently with limited effect (cf Hansen 1995). My more modest conclusion is that the pessimistic view of the potential of education is not always correct.

The role of education must be seen in the light of a more fundamental question: How have gender relations in Denmark in fact changed? Again, existing research offers diverging interpretations. Contributions from within women's studies often hold a critical view, maintaining that women have been partly freed from a family patriarchy only to be subjected to a state patriarchy,

and that integration in the labour market means a general increase in the workload of women, because they are only marginally relieved of domestic work. Other social scientists argue that although real equality between men and women has not been achieved, many traditional kinds of inequality have been greatly reduced; the sociologist Erik Jørgen Hansen has even said that today the debate on equal opportunity for women is obscuring other and much greater social inequalities (Hansen 1992a).

As I see it, there is no reason to deny the fact that gender inequality has been greatly reduced, in the family as well as in other areas of social life, and that women have acquired a much stronger "power base" in the labour market and in the political system. Although many kinds of gender inequality persist, and although loosening of rigid gender roles fosters uncertainty and reaction, historical progress has been made. There is now partly a basis for debating gender differences in a new way, not as a forced inequality which should be done away with, but as differences which individuals and groups may make use of and mould, as elements of a social and cultural multiplicity.

Adult education may have a special role to play in this development. In the ordinary educational system, which is dominated by strong institutional structures and processes, there is a tendency that the reduction of gender inequality leads to uniformity and one-dimensionality. But adult education, which is less institutionalized and has stronger links to other social and cultural areas, should offer better chances of combining gender equality with multiplicity.

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